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**China-Malaysia Relations and the Belt and Road Initiative:  
An analysis based on Constructivist Theory**

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**Abstract**

China-Malaysia relations have a long history. At present, benefiting from the solid foundation laid by China and Malaysia, the Belt and Road Initiative has achieved remarkable results, from which both countries have gained. Starting from the background of the Belt and Road Initiative, this paper explores the development of China-Malaysia relations through the view of constructivist theory by reviewing and analysing cases of cooperation outcomes between China and Malaysia in the fields of politics, economy, and culture and finds that cultural exchanges are indispensable to the advancement of the bilateral relationship between China and Malaysia.

**Keywords:** China-Malaysia Relations; the Belt and Road Initiative; Constructivist Theory

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**1.0 Introduction**

China and Malaysia share a long common history. As early as the 2nd century B.C., Chinese merchants went to the Malay Peninsula to engage in commercial activities. (Luo, Shengrong.,2018) On May 31 1974, Malaysia and China established diplomatic relations. Relations between the two countries have developed smoothly since the establishment of diplomatic relations. In 1999, the two countries signed a joint statement on a framework for future bilateral cooperation, and in 2004, the leaders of the two countries reached a consensus on China-Malaysia strategic cooperation. In 2013, the leaders of the two countries agreed to elevate the China-Malaysia Strategic Cooperation Relationship to a Comprehensive Strategic Partnership. In 2014, on the 40th anniversary of the establishment of diplomatic relations between the People's Republic of China (PRC) and Malaysia, the Joint Communiqué on the 40th Anniversary of the

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Establishment of Diplomatic Relations between the People's Republic of China and Malaysia was issued. The two sides proposed important initiatives including accelerating the joint construction of the 21st century Maritime Silk Road.

In March 2017, the Belt and Road Initiative was included in the United Nations resolution, and in the same year, China and Malaysia signed an intergovernmental Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on "Belt and Road" cooperation. and in 2023, the two countries proposed the construction of a China-Malaysia Common Future Community. At present, in addition to the Embassy, China has Consulates General in Kuching, Kota Kinabalu, and Penang, while Malaysia has Consulates General in Shanghai, Guangzhou, Kunming, Nanning, Xi'an, and Hong Kong.

## 2.0 Literature Review

### 2.1 Research on the Belt and Road Initiative

The Belt and Road-related policy research, such as opportunities and challenges in the construction of the Belt and Road, has been discussed by academia. In the research on opportunities and challenges in the construction of the Belt and Road in Malaysia, a scholar pointed out that in political circles, Malaysian national leaders have repeatedly expressed their support for this initiative, but some politicians also worry that the ruling party is too close to China. The Malaysian business community regards the Belt and Road as a pure economic initiative that contains huge business opportunities and a broad market. In the media, the Chinese media have been praising the Belt and Road, while the Malay media have been less interested (Ku, 2021). This research also reflects that China and Malaysia have realised the importance of cross-cultural exchanges, but there are still some shortcomings in the actual people-to-people exchanges, which leads to a lack of smooth communication between the two sides and a failure to truly realise the connection between the people. Overcoming these shortcomings will usher in new opportunities for the development of bilateral relations. On the contrary, allowing the disadvantages to develop will hinder China-Malaysia relations. Chinese scholar Tao Fengming et al. (2023) obtained the data of domestic and international research papers on the Belt and Road Initiative from the CNKI and WoS databases from October 1, 2013, to October 31, 2020, respectively, and found that in terms of research scope, keywords on this topic began to involve various research fields in 2015. Such as "trade facilitation," "regional economy," and "geopolitics." With time, the keywords also involve "global governance," "cultural industry," "energy consumption," and so on. Relatively speaking, the domestic research scope of China is more extensive, involving "human destiny communities," "opening up to the outside world," "cultural communication," and other aspects (Tao, 2023). This is a relatively new, comprehensive study. According to Hu (2022), the Belt and Road itself is also a large policy system that includes rich cultural policy content. As an important and innovative form of cultural policy, the Belt and Road Initiative is a major policy agenda setting in the history of the development of contemporary Chinese cultural policy and has opened a new era in the history of the development of contemporary Chinese cultural policy. Wang Rui et al. (2022) made a quantitative analysis of 164 policy texts on Belt and Road cooperation issued by 31 provinces and cities in China from 2013 to 2021 and explored the diversified collaborative policy support system formed by local governments, which is dominated by the government and jointly participated by enterprises, society, and international organisations. Furthermore, the Belt and Road initiative encompasses a multifaceted meaning, extending beyond its primary focus on economic development to encompass various other domains, including but not limited to trade and commerce. The term encompasses various dimensions, including political, cultural, social, and ecological factors. Hence, it is imperative to adopt a comprehensive approach to analysing the Belt and Road Initiative from several angles.

### 2.2 Research on China-Malaysia Relations

There are studies on the history of international relations and the status quo of China-Malaysia relations. Most of the studies on the history of China-Malaysia relations are divided into historical periods and stages or discussed under the framework of China-ASEAN cooperation, and some analyse the political relations between China and Malaysia from the perspective of political parties. In 2013, after China proposed the Belt and Road Initiative, the economic and trade cooperation between China and Malaysia was comprehensively deepened, the research on China-Malaysia relations has gradually increased, and the discussion of the Belt and Road has added to the research on China-Malaysia relations. For example, Luo Yongkun believes that since 2018, China-Malaysia relations have undergone three stages: twists and turns, recovery, and quality upgrading. Malaysia's leaders have a positive understanding of China. UMNO's long-term rule has laid the foundation for the development of China-Malaysia relations, and the solid foundation of China-Malaysia relations is the main reason for the stable development of China-Malaysia relations. (Luo, 2022)

In the meantime, many scholars are used to discussing topics about Malaysia from the perspective of ASEAN; they emphasise Malaysia as an ASEAN member country but ignore discussing pure China-Malaysia bilateral relations. In recent years, some studies have been based on the Belt and Road framework on the China-Malaysia relationship and the relationship between China and ASEAN, mainly focusing on economic relations, foreign policy, dilemmas, etc. Among those studies, the Belt and Road Initiative is a new impetus to strengthen China-Malaysia relations (Kong, 2017). demonstrates that by way of economic cooperation, Malaysia and China reached a lot of science and technology exchanges and cooperation programs between colleges and universities. Research also analyses the framework of bilateral relations from the perspective of news reports. One of the latest studies in 2021, *Malaysia-China Relations during the movement control order period and beyond, assessment from the mutual trust variable* (Lee, et al., 2021), looks at the prospect of Malaysia-China relations in the post-MCO period. The authors provide their assessments based on multi-dimensional factors that continue to build bilateral mutual trust and have the potential to erode it. Its research and data analysis methods are worth emulating in this study.

### 2.3 Theoretical Framework

Constructivism is a new international relations theory that has not existed for a long time. Constructivism emerged in the mid-to-late 1980s, drawing on the concept of the British school's international community and the critical perspective. (Li Senlin, 2019) According to Liang Me, it is not a pure political theory but rather one absorbing nutrition from many other fields, and it is more appropriate for studying China's international relations. (Liang Me, 2010). There are different schools of constructivism, among which Alexander Wendt is the representative of social constructivism, whose theoretical monograph, *Social Theory of International Politics*, explains the theoretical system of constructivist international relations. Wendt's constructivism is known as "via media," which is between rationalism and reflexivism. It attaches importance to the role of concepts and believes that the identities and interests of states are not pre-determined factors but are constructed in the interactions between states. Wendt summarises three different anarchic cultures of the international system: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian. According to Qin Yaqing (2002), constructivism, as a relatively new theory of international relations, combines philosophical and sociological reflections, is based on holism and conceptualism, which emphasise conceptual structures and the process of actors' practical activities and encompasses the changeability of the culture of the international system and the possibilities for the evolution of international society. According to Ji Yushang (2023), constructivist international relations theory is vital. First, to improve and enhance the country's image, it is necessary to constantly strengthen the interaction with the outside world and emphasise the relevance of the practice of mutual identity shaping.

### 3.0 Methodology

The main research methods of this paper include a literature review, policy analysis, and a case study. By reviewing relevant literature, including academic journals, research reports, government documents, and documents from international organisations, background information, policy documents, essential events, and academic perspectives on China-Malaysia relations and the Belt and Road Initiative are collected and organised to establish an in-depth understanding of the research topic. Hence, this study explores the policies and positions of China and Malaysia under the Belt and Road Initiative framework through policy analysis. To study the documents, agreements, and official statements issued by the two governments to understand the policy objectives, priority areas, and cooperation frameworks. Select typical cooperation achievements in the areas of infrastructure, economic and trade exchanges, and cultural exchanges between China and Malaysia since the launch of the Belt and Road Initiative, and describe the selected cases in detail, including information on the background, objectives, scale, and geographic location of the projects. Introduce the cooperation methods, participating organisations, and critical features of the project between China and Malaysia, and analyse the policies and positions of China and Malaysia in the case. Examine relevant documents, agreements, and official statements issued by the two governments to understand the policy objectives, cooperation frameworks, and policy support of both sides in the project. Focus on examining the impact of these cases on the Belt and Road Initiative and China-Malaysia relations, extracting insights about China-Malaysia relations and the Belt and Road Initiative from the case, and discussing the insights and recommendations of similar cases for future China-Malaysia cooperation.

This research mainly uses primary and written literature. The existing data was searched by subject classification, theme, and author, and the literature was traced through references. The scope of data collection includes two categories. The first is to collect academic documents containing "China-Malaysia Relations," including documents with the keywords "Constructivist Theory" and "the Belt and Road," which are classified as the category with the highest relevance to this study, and documents only containing relevant contents of "China-Malaysia Relations" or "the Belt and Road," which are used as auxiliary references. The second category is to collect news and reports related to cultural exchanges between China and Malaysia, covering the period from 2013 to 2022. The main sources of information are the official website and database of the Belt and Road Initiative, which are the Belt and Road National Information Service Platform and the official Belt and Road portal. The data are mainly written materials, supplemented by video and audio materials.

### 4.0 Findings and Discussion

The Belt and Road is an acronym for the "Silk Road Economic Belt" and the "21st Century Maritime Silk Road," proposed by China's government in 2013. In October 2013, China and Malaysia issued the Joint Press Communiqué of the People's Republic of China and Malaysia in Kuala Lumpur. The two sides highly valued the development of China-Malaysia relations and agreed to upgrade the China-Malaysia strategic cooperation relationship to a comprehensive strategic partnership, after which the two countries gradually began a cooperation agenda of discussing the construction of the Belt and Road together.

China and Malaysia have had a long history of people-to-people exchanges since ancient times. Before the formal establishment of diplomatic relations, civil trade activities accompanied by cultural exchanges had never been interrupted. Currently, China is pursuing an independent foreign policy of peace and adhering to the principles of amity, sincerity, mutual benefit, and inclusiveness, while Malaysia, relying on ASEAN, is pursuing a pragmatic foreign policy, upholding the concepts of openness and cooperation, and working with other countries to promote prosperity and stability in the region. China and Malaysia can be said to be bidirectional in their foreign policy; the two countries rely on the "Belt and Road" cooperation platform, which can lead to more exchanges and cooperation projects at a higher level. According to the theory of constructivism, in Hobbesian anarchic culture, the identity of the state is the enemy, which is the reason why the current local wars will appear. In Lockean anarchic culture, the state is a competitor. Countries recognise each other's sovereignty, but there is a possibility of using violence to resolve disputes. In the Kantian anarchic culture, on the other hand, states are friends and follow the principles of non-violence and mutual assistance. Wendt sees the present stage of the development of international society as a Lockean cultural system, but he believes that international society will not regress and that Kantian culture will

be the dominant feature of international society in the future. (Qin Yaqing, 2005) The relationship between China and Malaysia has not been in the state of Hobbesian culture since ancient times; the two countries have recognised each other's sovereignty and established formal diplomatic relations, and the two sides have not used violence to resolve disputes. From the perspective of the Belt and Road Cooperation, the two sides have been relying on it for nearly ten years and have achieved fruitful results in various fields. China and Malaysia may have entered the state of Kantian culture. However, according to Wendt, "anarchy is what states make of it." (Wendt, A., 1992), A single anarchic logic does not exist; the international system is dynamic, and among the three cultures, one of the anarchic cultures dominates depends on how the culture is constructed between countries through practical activities. Therefore, the author believes that under the framework of Belt and Road cooperation, the relationship between China and Malaysia is between the Lockean anarchic culture and the Kantian anarchic culture, and from the current trend of cooperation, it is developing in the direction of the Kantian culture. Constructivism is the relatively optimistic theory that international relations are constantly evolving and developing, which means that China-Malaysia relations will one day enter a state of Kantian culture. As a public platform or product for international cooperation, the Belt and Road first adheres to the purposes and principles of the United Nations Charter, which means it is built on the foundation of Lockean culture. At the same time, the Belt and Road adheres to the principles of extensive consultation, joint contribution, and shared benefits and adheres to harmony, inclusiveness, mutual benefit, and win-win, its framework, the Silk Road, includes closer economic ties, deeper political mutual trust, broader and deeper humanistic exchanges, mutual appreciation and co-prosperity of different civilisations, and mutual knowledge and fellowship, peace, and friendship of all peoples, which means that its direction of development is the state of Kantian culture. From this perspective, it is also not difficult to see that under the Belt and Road cooperation framework, China-Malaysia relations, based on Lockean culture, are developing in the direction of Kantian culture.

## 5.0 Conclusion & Recommendations

The realisation of Kantian culture is centered on the construction of culture between China and Malaysia. In constructivism, culture is an important core variable, and the culture of international relations is broadly defined as shared knowledge or shared ideas, which is the structure or characteristic of the international system. An important way to build culture is through cultural exchange, and there is a deep foundation for cultural exchange between China and Malaysia. This research examines the exchange activities between China and Malaysia, ensuring the accuracy and authenticity of the discussed information without any falsification or fabrication. Nonetheless, it is important to acknowledge that the cultural exchange activities officially documented may not provide a comprehensive overview of the entire cultural exchange landscape between China and Malaysia. This limitation arises from the existence of unrecorded private exchanges, which are not captured in the official data. That is the limitation of the research. Apart from the theory of constructivism, other theories within the field of international relations can also be utilised in the examination of this subject. Moreover, when integrated with pertinent ideas about intercultural communication, many research outcomes may arise. From Zheng He's voyage to the West to open up the ancient Maritime Silk Road to the current Belt and Road, there are official exchanges between China and Malaysia, and there are private interactions. Civilisational integration and cultural exchanges have never been interrupted, which may be the reason why the two countries have been rapidly moving towards Kantian culture.

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